Marsha "Pay It No Mind" Johnson was an incredible activist, sex worker, drag queen, and black trans woman who every queer person in the US today owes an immense debt of gratitude, whether they are aware of it or not.

Hers is a name you've almost definitely heard before… she has been honored in books, documentaries, a google icon tribute, and much more since her death in 1992. However, many accounts of her life are sanitized, more palatable versions of the truth. This article will not be that.

A Photograph of Marsha P. Johnson Reading a Letter at Her Birthday Party

Many articles on Johnson's early life deadname and misgender her, which you will also not find here.

She arrived in New York City from her hometown in New Jersey at only age 17 and quickly established herself in Greenwich Village. This was not the Village as it's known today.

The Village had long been a hotbed for artists, from the beat poets of the 50s onwards.
The neighborhood was known for its avant-garde stylings, revolutionary culture, and frequent police brutality.

Both sex work and same-sex relations were illegal in New York City at the time, and The Village had both in spades. Gay bars, at this time, were the main cultural center for queer people, and in response, the NY State Liquor Authority, as well as the New York Police Department, targeted gay bars in particular.

People do recognize that through cooptation, queer spaces are being taken away from us. The response has been to start creating alternative spaces like Savour, Gay Shame, Vazaleen, Alternative Pride (Queer By Nature), etc. However, all of these spaces (as important as they are) do not confront the cooptation of existing queer spaces.

Without an active resistance against the cooptation of existing queer spaces, we are perpetually caught in a cycle of having to create alternative spaces to alternative spaces to alternative spaces to alternative spaces...

That's why alongside creating alternative spaces, we need to actively resist against queer spaces (like Pride) being taken away from us through cooptation. Otherwise, we are constantly giving into domination and facilitating ourselves being pushed into the margins. That's regression, not progress.

It's time to question and challenge our "community". It's time to fight back, and it's time to reclaim Pride. Along the same lines, we need to make sure that we become more inclusive with the Dyke March, keep it and develop it as a politicized space, and never ever lose it like we did Pride.

Respecting that resistance is created from a diversity of tactics, the following 3 actions (listed below) are being organized by different community groups for this year's Dyke March and Pride:

Limp Fist:
Resist! Revolt! Celebrate!

Sex Professionals of Canada:
Whores And Dykes Unite!

Queer Diversity:
Renegade Community Fair
& Protest Against The Coopation of Pride

Calling all Radical Queers, Trans People, Youth, Sex Workers, Poly People, Anti-Poverty Activists, & Allies:

Sick and tired of the mainstreaming of the "Gay Movement"?
Frustrated at being pushed out of and excluded from queer spaces?
Angry at getting kicked out of a queer community we helped create?

What the fuck? Is everyone buying into gentrification?
Are there no radicals left to fight back in Toronto?

If you're a pissed off and unapologetic hooker, tranny, gender queer, radical, lived/worked on the streets, or an ally, *it's time to fight back!*

Help build another (yes, another, 'cause we've been down this road before) resistance to the battle that's been with us ever since (and even before) the Stonewall riots.

Back in the day of the Stonewall riots, many of us weren't welcome in gay bars and this still holds true today in many of the posh gay spaces that have been created since.

Many of the people who started the Stonewall riots ended up joining and supporting the gay movement, yet they were quickly dropped from the gay agenda. Within a few years, the Gay Activists Alliance had eliminated drag and transvestite concerns from it's civil rights agenda and Drag rights were also eliminated from a proposed gay rights bill to make it more acceptable.

It's been decades and little has changed. We are now pushed into the margins and dissed by a movement we helped create. On top of that, we're constantly told to tone down as middle class queers are busy assimilating into mainstream culture and told to be grateful for the few scraps thrown our way.

Meanwhile, trans people, sex workers, homeless/street-involved queers, people of color, and the visibly queer constantly face increasing violence and marginalization with every new mainstream

— that queer people would pay to have a safe space to simply exist — and took it.

However, being catered to by the mob had consequences. The now-famous Stonewall Inn, for example, lacked running water to wash dishes or have sanitary bathrooms, and often served drinks that were unsanitary at best and dangerous at worst. Mob members routinely blackmailed patrons, threatening to out them if they did not perform favors or pay mob bosses.

The Stonewall Inn was one of the cheaper gay bars in the Village, and one of the few that allowed drag queens. It also allowed dancing, which was explicitly forbidden at most gay bars (due to dancing often attracting police attention). Although raids were common under the mafia's protection, the Inn's patrons were usually pre-warned.

The Stonewall became a nightly shelter for many queer youths who had nowhere else to turn, as the entry fees were much cheaper than many other locations.

This was where Marsha, 17, broke, and homeless, found herself. She, like many others in the area, turned to sex work to support herself. It was here that Marsha began doing drag, originally referring to herself as "Black Marsha". As time went on, she began using "drag" full-time. When questioned about this, she would reply "pay it no mind", and was asked it so often that she coyly took that as her middle initial.

On June 28th, 1969, NYPD officers raided the Stonewall Inn. The mob hadn't been warned about this raid. No one knew it was coming. The tippers of the NYPD that the Genovese family had hired failed them. The police found plenty of criminal activity, including bootleg alcohol and cross-dressers.

Cross-dressing was illegal at the time and it was police policy to have female officers take suspected cross-dressers to a bathroom, strip them, and forcibly investigate their genitals to determine if they were committing a crime.

If that sounds familiar to current legislation around sports for children emerging in the United States, it should.

These forced genital exams not only included drag queens, but butch

The boarded up Stonewall Inn after the riot the weekend of 28th June, 1969

Queer people could be arrested and charged with a huge variety of crimes. Even a gathering of "homosexuals" alone could be punishable by law as "disorderly behavior".

Activists pushed and won huge success when, in 1966, it became legal to serve homosexuals alcohol. You read that right. Beforehand, it had been illegal to serve homosexuals alcohol in the United States on the basis that it may "encourage their vices".

This action functionally legalized gay bars' existence but did not stop the near-constant harassment of these institutions by police.

Public same-sex PDA was still illegal.

How was that defined? It was up to the officer's discretion. This meant that any queer person could be arrested (with violence) at any time, and jailed, based fully on the whims of police officers.

Additionally, many gay bars did not have legal liquor licenses, as many were owned by organized crime groups. The mafia saw an opportunity

queer victoy. There is no conscience about the lashback we face as a result of these victories, or the effects of the long term systematic exclusion (past, present, and future) we face as a result of the blind pursuit for mainstream acceptance.

It doesn't matter how many of us are murdered, go missing, or find ourselves excluded, bashed, or beaten. The band plays on like the single minded machine that it was always meant to be.

Pride Toronto is busy celebrating it's 25th anniversary...
but wait, something is wrong...
something got lost in all the circuit parties
the alcohol laden, inaccessible and ageist spaces

The Dyke March is now the last refuge for those of us looking for the politics that began Pride, well, actually any politics at all!

Since when did we become a tourist attraction? Where is our community? Why is it that many queer people choose to go elsewhere on the day of Pride? What happened to the revolution? Since when did "revolution" become an embarrassing word associated with those unwanted angry types?

THIS IS A TIME FOR REFLECTION!!

When the mainstream throw us a few scraps after long years of hard fought struggles, how do we react? As we morph and grow, and become "accepted", who are we leaving behind? What her/history and identities are we erasing? What principles do we compromise?

As it stands, Pride is now a coopted event, and an epitome of what is happening to the rest of the queer community. It is an event that perpetuates homophobia, transphobia, racism, sexism, social classism, economic classism, polyphobia, bodyphobia, binary-dominance, sex-negativity, erotophobia, ableism, ageism, anti-sexwork sentiment, systemic exclusion... in short, all of those issues that it was meant to address and fight.

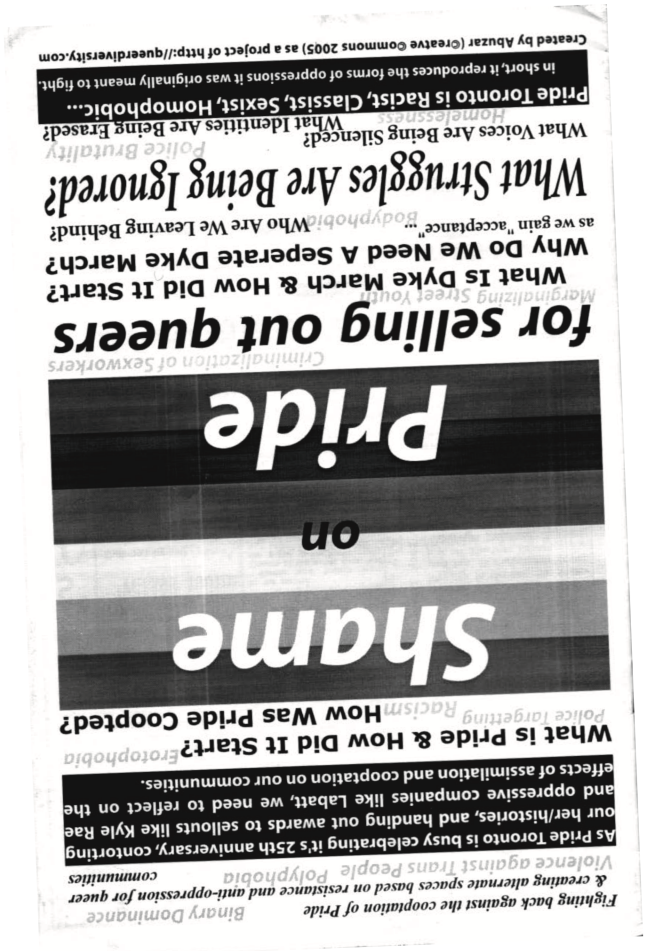

Shame
on
Pride
for selling out queers
What is Dyke March & How Did It Start?
Why Do We Need A Seperate Dyke March?
as we gain "acceptance"... Who Are We Leaving Behind?
What Struggles Are Being Ignored?
What Voices Are Being Silenced?
What Identities Are Being Erased?
Pride Toronto is Racist, Classist, Sexist, Homophobic...
in short, it reproduces the forms of oppressions it was originally meant to fight.
Created by Abuzar (Creative Commons 2005) as a project of http://queerdiversity.com
What is Pride & How Did It Start?
How Was Pride Coopted?
As Pride Toronto is busy celebrating it's 25th anniversary, contorting our her/history, and handing out awards to sellouts like Kyle Rae and oppressive companies like Labatt, we need to reflect on the effects of assimilation and cooptation on our communities.
Fighting back against the cooptation of Pride
& creating alternate spaces based on resistance and anti-oppression for queer communities

Photo from the Stonewall Riots , 1969

lesbians, trans people and anyone else who was in suspicion of cross dressing.

The exact details of June 28th, 1969, have been endlessly debated, however, the general consensus is that the neighborhood, agitated at the lack of warning, hung around outside the bar as 13 arrests were conducted. The arrests were rough, and officers were flagrantly violent towards their captives. Most accounts agree that one officer hit a butch lesbian over the head as he forced her into a police car. She shouted to the crowd to do something, and all hell broke loose.

The crowd had no weapons. Against fully armed police officers, the queer destitute and outcast began to throw objects at the officers. The courage involved in that action alone should stun you.

There are a lot of discussions in the modern day about who, exactly, threw the first brick.

The truth is that whoever threw the "first" brick matters far less than how many people were throwing bricks. The riot at the Stonewall Inn — and the beginning of the queer rights movement as we know it — was a movement of solidarity, not individualism.

Some STAR members, particularly Rivera, were also active in the Young Lords, a revolutionary Puerto Rican youth organization. One of the first times the STAR banner was flown in public was at a mass demonstration against police repression organized by the Young Lords in East Harlem in 1970, in which STAR participated as a group. STAR House lasted for only two or three years and inspired a few short-lived imitators in other cities, but its legacy lives on even now.

A few other transgender groups formed in New York in the early 1970s. A trans woman named Judy Bowen organized two extremely short-lived groups: Transvestites and Transsexuals (TAT) in 1970 and Transsexuals Anonymous in 1971. More significant was the Queens' Liberation Front (QLF), founded by drag queen Lee Brewster and heterosexual transvestite Bunny Eisenhower.

The QLF formed in part to resist the erasure of drag and trans visibility in the first Christopher Street Liberation Day march, which commemorated the Stonewall Riots and is now an annual event held in New York on the last Sunday in June. In many other cities, this weekend has become the traditional date to celebrate LGBTQ Pride. The formation of the QLF demonstrates how quickly the gay liberation movement started to push aside some of the very people who had the greatest stake in militant resistance at Stonewall.

QLF members participated in that first Christopher Street Liberation Day march and were involved in several other political campaigns through the next few years—including wearing drag while lobbying state legislators in Albany. QLF's most lasting contribution, however, was the publication of Drag Queen magazine (later simply Drag), which had the best coverage of transgender news and politics in the United States, and which offered fascinating glimpses of trans life and activism outside the major coastal cities. In New York, QLF founder Lee Brewster's private business, Lee's Mardi Gras Boutique, was a gathering place for segments of the city's transgender community well into the 1990s.

The NYPD did not admit any wrongdoing or formally apologize for the violence and discrimination that led to and precipitated the Stonewall Riots until 2019. This is after years of advocacy to beg for even that crumb of closure. Nothing is over. None of these wounds are healed. The wounds haven't even been allowed to close, as police brutality and over-policing still plagues the queer community today, most prominently affecting trans women of color.

But let's get back to Marsha.

She is often cited as if the Stonewall Riots were her single great contribution to queer rights. This is a discredit to her. Her activism extended both earlier than and long after the riots. The Stonewall Riots became her origin story.

Imagine this. Imagine being a young black homeless trans woman drag queen sex worker in 1969. Whatever level of horror you're imagining isn't enough. You've been beaten, assaulted, harassed, arrested, abused, and more. And at only 23 years old, you see your community rise up. This is in the midst of protests and national movements against war and sexism and racism and violence and bigotry of all kinds.

In all of this, you and your allies, young and vulnerable though you are, with protection from neither the mob nor the police, homeless and destitute and barely allowed to so much as exist… someone throws a brick.

And it matters.

One person throwing a brick leads to an arrest.

Hundreds lead to a riot.

Thousands lead to a movement for a better world.

The mob at the Stonewall Inn breached multiple police barricades before setting fire to the Inn itself. The fire department was called, but the metaphorical fire that started that night was much more difficult to put out.

The protests lasted 5 days, garnering media attention and sparking increased awareness and activism for queer rights across the nation and the world.

The next year, in 1970, NYC's first Pride Parade began at the doors of the Stonewall Inn. June is Pride Month because of Stonewall, and because of a riot against police brutality.

Newspapers at the time tried to downplay the riots, and celebrated the "successes" of the police at containing them, to the point of obscuring the truth. Any mentions of violence committed by police are omitted, replaced by counts of officers injured and villainization of protestors. (Familiar?)

But for all the impact it had, Stonewall's Legacy remains taboo, and as such is sanitized to the point of falsehood in many retellings.

It was a riot, outright, with arson and violence against the police by a group of criminal sex workers, drag queens, queers, and mobsters.

Even at the time, many queer organizations such as The Mattachine Society disapproved and publicly tried to distance themselves from the rioters.

The queer community is not a monolith and never will be.

♠

The photo below was taken in Times Square a few days after the initial riot, when protests were widespread across New York City. These are some of the original members of the group that would become the Gay Liberation Front.

Stonewall's Transgender Legacy

Transgender History:
Roots of Todays Revolution
Susan Stryker

page 100-102

Within a month of the Stonewall Riots, gay activists inspired by the events in Greenwich Village formed the Gay Liberation Front (GLF), which modeled itself on radical Third World liberation and anti-imperialist movements. The GLF spread quickly through activist networks in the student and antiwar movements, primarily among white young people of middle-class origin.

Almost as quickly as it formed, however, divisions appeared within the GLF, primarily taking aim at the movement's domination by white men and its perceived marginalization of women, working-class people, people of color, and trans people. People with more liberal, less radical politics soon organized as the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA), which aimed to reform laws rather than foment revolution. Many lesbians redirected their energy toward radical feminism and the women's movement. And trans people, after early involvement in the GLF (and being explicitly excluded from the GAA's agenda), quickly came to feel that they did not have a welcome place in the movement they had done much to inspire. As a consequence, they soon formed their own organizations.

In 1970, Sylvia Rivera and another Stonewall regular, Marsha P. Johnson, established STAR—Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries. Their primary goal was to help street kids stay out of jail, or get out of jail, and to find food, clothing, and a place to live. They opened STAR House, an overtly politicized version of the "house" culture that already characterized black and Latino queer kinship networks, where dozens of trans youth could count on a free and safe place to sleep.

Rivera and Johnson, as "house mothers," would hustle to pay the rent, while their "children" would scrounge for food. Their goal was to educate and protect the younger people who were coming into the kind of life they themselves led—they even dreamed of establishing a school for kids who'd never learned to read and write because their formal education was interrupted by discrimination and bullying.

Riots happen when desperate, hurting people have nothing left to lose.

The queer community was marginalized and forced into destitution, violence, and abuse by organizations, politicians, and bystanders alike.

The Marsha P. Johnson google doodle is an excellent example of that. In it, Marsha's likeness has been presented as peacefully leading a street parade, with banners of pride flags held by marchers.

Many organizations "celebrating" Stonewall's legacy today sanitize its roots and obscure their own complicity in the conditions that led to an open riot.

QUEEN POWER

FAGS AGAINST PIGS IN
STONEWALL BUST

Rat Subterranean News
July 9-23, 1969

About 1:30 Saturday morning, I happened along Sheridan Sq. with a friend looking for a beer when we saw a crowd gathered outside the Stonewall, a famed gay bar. We walked over to see what was happening.

About 3-400 guys were jammed in around a police car in front of the door, taunting several pigs in plainclothes guarding the entrance.

"They raided the joint, the fucking bastards," a couple of guys told us. "Why?" we asked. "Operating without a a liquor license.."

"Shit, man, they's out like always to chase us down and give us a good fuck. They ain't got nothin else to do during the summer," a hip spade was shouting.

We tried to find more information, just as the pigs started hauling off in a squad car a guy they had dragged outside. The crowd protested wildly, booing, shrieking, "Up against the wall, faggots!"

"Beat it' off, pigs!" A few tried jumping out to disrupt the no-man's land between the door and the squad car, but most as yet were reticent about provoking any pig violence. Someone tried to sell me some speed, and another asked me for a knife. "I'm gonna slice up those motherfuckers' tires."

"How many arrests?" I asked. "A few," "What happened inside" I pursued. "About 1:15 they came, but they kept the music and dancing going so's not to get everyone up. They checked identity. If you had it they let you go, if not they held you up till they found out more."

The crowd grew larger and more agitated as the squad car drove off and a wagon pulled up. People began beating the wagon, booing, trying to see who was being hauled out and off.

Several pigs were on guard and periodically threatened the crowd unless

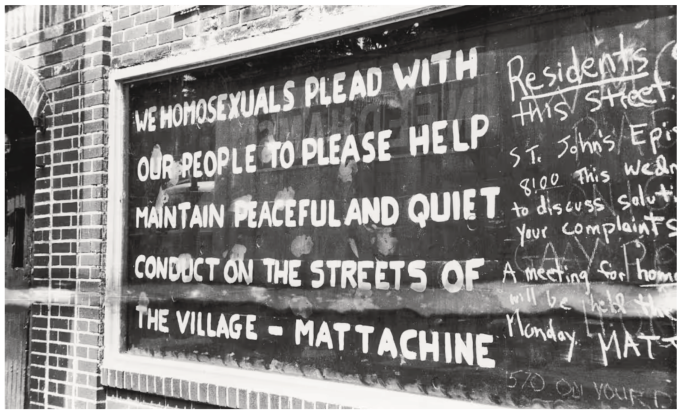
Marsha's unique style of drag (mostly foraged from the dumpsters of NYC) and tenacity led her to become the most famous drag queen of her era, even touring the world with the drag theatre company, Hot Peaches, in 1972. She also performed with the Angels of Light in 1973.

This was probably the high point of Marsha P Johnson's life.

Because fundamentally, the story of Marsha P Johnson is a story of failure. Not of her failure, but of the failure of her institutions, her peers, and her movement to prioritize their most vulnerable.

STAR was forced to close in 1973 but is still remembered as it was the first queer youth shelter in the United States as well as the first organization founded and run exclusively by trans women of color (that we know of).

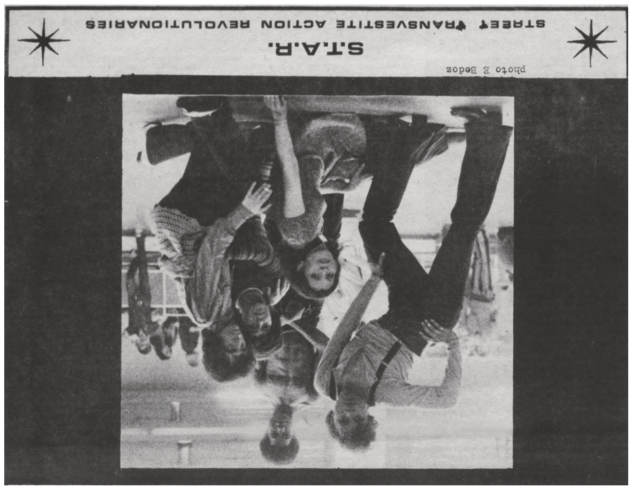
The organizers of the 1973 Pride Parade banned both Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, claiming that drag queens and "transvestites" would give the cause of gay liberation "a bad name". If this sounds familiar to the rhetoric currently circulating about whether kink and other "unseemly" queer presentations should be allowed at Pride, that's because *it's the same recycled argument.*



Message painted on the boarded-up Stonewall bar after the riots.

These were protests that the New York City Riot Squad was attempting to shut down, in the 60s, with 60s police tactics. The people in this photo are *so young*. The three people in front can't be older than 20. They are *kids*, marching in the street, risking their lives, to prove they exist and demand that they be allowed to. (Does this also sound familiar?)

Marsha, as well as a close friend of hers, a Latina trans woman named Sylvia Rivera, went on from Stonewall to become some of the most significant queer rights activists in history. These two founded the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) in 1970.



The primary goal of STAR was to serve as a mutual aid and support network for homeless transgender youth in NYC. STAR owned a building on the lower East side, and from there, sheltered, fed, organized, and advocated for trans youth.

This year also saw the first Pride Parade, which was a celebration and vigil to commemorate the anniversary of the riot.

The cops inside were scared shitless, dodging projectiles and flying glass. The orgy was taking place. Vengeance vented against the source of repression-gay bars, busts, kids victimized and exploited by the mafia and cops. Strangely, no one spoke to the crowd or tried to direct the insurrection.

Everyone's heads were in the same place. Some chanted "occupy-take over, take over" "Fag power," but kids were really scared about going too far as they saw the cops pulling guns from inside, pointed directly at the crowd.

A volley of objects bounced off the walls inside. Then one cop in a fury took his gun and actually hurled it at the crowd. People couldn't believe what had happened, for the gun hit the door frame with a clunk and lay there. A miracle it hadn't gone off.

The pigs carried futility to the extreme and turned the firehose on the mob through the door. Jeers, derision. Some shouted to "grab it, grab his cock" Some then let a trash can full of paper afire and stuffed it through the window. Flames leaped up. Then "Riot pigs" somebody was shouting. Sirens approached and kids started spilling out over the fences of Sheridan Square to flee the scene.

On each side together there must have been around 1500-2000 people by this time milling about, being pushed back by about 30 or more riot cops. It was hard to tell exactly how many. But no one was ready to get their heads beat in and most of the crowds to the sides were now filled with the curious.

People hung around till after 4 am talking in little groups. People were excited and angry. In talking to a number of kids who had been inside, it was evident most understood at least rudimentarily what was happening to them. What was and should have always been theirs, what should have been the free control of the people was dramatized shown up for what it really was, an instrument of power and exploitation. It was theatre, totally spontaneous. There was no bullshit.

In protest, Johnson and Rivera then marched ahead of the beginning of the parade.

Throughout the 1970s, her drag performances heavily influenced the art form, and her protests heavily influenced the progression of queer rights.

She became so well known that in 1975 she was captured by Andy Warhol for his “ladies and gentlemen” series.

"Marsha’s position on Christopher Street is double-edged. A martyr of gay liberation, [she] is denied entrance to many bars. Andy Warhol silkscreens of Marsha sell for $1400 in a Christopher Street gallery while Marsha walks the sidewalk outside, broke." ~ the Village Voice, 1979 *(ctd. on page 41)*

She became a marshal with ACT UP throughout the 1980s. She collaborated with and earned the respect of other activists, even the opposing force of hers in the queer rights movement, Randy Wicker.

Wicker had been one of the Mattachines, and one of the greatest proponents of the strategy that queer liberation could only come by convincing straight people that gay people were “just like them”. He was college-educated, wore a suit, and answered questions on television. This strategy was extremely popular at the time, especially by white gays and lesbians. This strategy also had no room for “distasteful” people.

I’ve been trying to get up here all day for your gay brothers and your gay sisters in jail that write me every motherfucking week and ask for your help and you all don’t do a goddamn thing for them. Have you ever been beaten up and raped and jailed?

Now think about it.

They’ve been beaten up and raped after they’ve had to spend much of their money in jail to get their [inaudible], and try to get their sex changes. The women have tried to fight for their sex changes or to become women. On the women’s liberation and they write ‘STAR,’ not to the women’s groups, they do not write women, they do not write men, they write ‘STAR’ because we’re trying to do something for them

I have been to jail. I have been raped. And beaten. Many times!

By men, heterosexual men that do not belong in the homosexual shelter. But, do you do anything for me? No. You tell me to go and hide my tail between my legs.

I will not put up with this shit. I have been beaten. I have had my nose broken. I have been thrown in jail. I have lost my job. I have lost my apartment for gay liberation and you all treat me this way? What the fuck’s wrong with you all?

Think about that!

I do not believe in a revolution, but you all do. I believe in the gay power. I believe in us getting our rights, or else I would not be out there fighting for our rights. That’s all I wanted to say to you people.

If you all want to know about the people in jail and do not forget Bambi L’amour, and Dora Mark, Kenny Metzner, and other gay people in jail, come and see the people at Star House on Twelfth Street on 640 East Twelfth Street between B and C apartment 14.

The people are trying to do something for all of us, and not men and women that belong to a white middle class white club. And that’s what you all belong to!

REVOLUTION NOW! Gimme a ‘G’! Gimme an ‘A’! Gimme a ‘Y’! Gimme a ‘P’! Gimme an ‘O’! Gimme a ‘W’! Gimme an ‘E! Gim me an ‘R’! [crying] Gay power! Louder! GAY POWER!

they moved back. Impossible to do. "Nobody's going to fuck around with me. I ain't going to take this shit," a guy in a dark red tee-shirt shouted, dancing in and out of the crowd.

Then they hauled a couple off into the van. It was hard to see or know what was happening inside. A few plainclothesmen were surveying the crowd, obviously panicked. As yet there was no support from the riot squad, though the longer the cops took, the hotter the crowd became.

They began shouting for different people that they knew were being held. "We want Tommy, the blond drag queen." shouts went up. Pennies ricocheted off the van, a beer can hit the door. Suddenly Tommy appeared in blond wig, etc. and walked coolly out the door. Shouts and screaming

"We want Tommy." Tommy, not held by the pigs, smiled and suddenly took off into the crowd to the left. The pigs were really flustered. Many went running after Tommy who took off in a taxi.

A couple more were thrown into the van. We joined in with some who wanted to storm the van, free those inside, then turn over the van. But nobody was yet prepared for that kind of action. Then a scuffle at the door.

One guy refused to be put into the van. 5 or 6 cops guarding the van tried to subdue him with little success. Several guys tried to help free him. Unguarded, 3 or 4 of those in the van appeared. then quickly disappeared into the crowd. This was all anyone needed.

Several others tried the resting the guy held by the cops, but the latter escaped into the Stonewall. Soon the van pulled out leaving the street unguarded. A few pigs outside had to flee for their lives inside and barricade themselves in. It was too good to be true. The crowd took the offensive.

The cat in the tee-shirt began by hurling a container of something at the door. Then a can or stone cracked a widow. Soon pandemonium broke loose. Cans, bottles, rocks, trashcans, finally a parking meter crashed the windows and door. Cheers went up. A sort of wooden wall blocking out the front plate glass windows was forced down. Then with the parking meter a ram, in went the door.

"It's hard work, being beautiful, when you don't have a place. I do my best though," Marsha drawled, putting another earring in her hair and spearing another piece of potato salad. "I'm trying to get my own place so I can have my wardrobe and I can set up my candles to the saints, my own altar. I haven't had my own alter in a long time. Maybe by the time of the gay pride parade I will have an apartment so I can invite my friends up for cocktails." Later, talking with Marsha's friends, I find that Marsha is always looking for apartments; she rarely gets one.

Marsha will carry a GAY LOVE banner in this year's parade, her ninth. "When I started I carried the S.T.A.R. banner, and then it became the GAY POOR PEOPLE banner and it's been GAY LOVE for the last couple years. I think that says everything. All the gay love party will do is give gay birthday parties. I'd like to give birthday parties for Charles Ludlam, Jackie Curtis, Harry Koutoukas, Bob Kohler, Sylvia Rivera, Bambi L'Amour, Bob Storm, Holly Woodlawn, John John, and the Hot Peaches. I think that's the "best organization for now."

Marsha finished her bowl of potato salad, knocked back the last drop of a soda, shook the earrings in her hair, and walked into Sheridan Square. "It's changed, honey, this street is a different place. But when it gets down to it, it's money that rules the world, and Lucifer is coming. Yes he is. In the meantime, spare change for a dying queen, darling?"

What the fuck's wrong with you all?

Sylvia Rivera
1973

Transcript of a speech given at the 4th Annual Christopher Street Liberation Day Rally in Washington Square Park after having to fight her way on stage

Y'all better quiet down.

STAR is trying to do something for all of us, not just white middle-class men and women in their white club.

~ Sylvia Rivera, 1973

Here is a video of organizers at the 1973 Pride Rally asking the crowd if they want to hear Sylvia Rivera speak.

(speech transcript at page 45)

Watching her speak on the queer community at large ignoring the most vulnerable among them (trans people, people of color, incarcerated people, and especially people in more than one of those categories) is still chillingly compelling to waWtch fifty years later, and horrifying to recognize the same fights still being fought within our community.

You can, quite loudly, hear the crowd booing her before she speaks, giving a speech about the rights of queer prisoners, and calling out the crowd for ignoring them. She also speaks about STAR and calls the crowd out for ignoring its vulnerable transgender members.

Marsha recently appeared in a Hot Peaches show celebrating the Pope's death. In honor of the occasion, Marsha was a nun for a night in a white habit and green-glittered eyes. She pulled out a crumpled paper and sang from it: "Climb Every Mountain," every verse, her voice wandering acapella up and down the scale. The audience, stoned and silent, hardly breathed, and then rose at once in honor. Marsha's power with her followers is hard to describe, but it is undeniable. When friends describe her they invariably use words like "saint," "charismatic queen," and "myth." In fact, Marsha was formally canonized years ago in a ceremony conducted by the Angels of Light and the Hot Peaches.

Some of Marsha's charisma is simply due to her survival power. Her past life would have destroyed many: several attempts on her life by johns, eight nervous breakdowns (by Marsha's count); more than 100 arrests (Marsha doesn't count anymore). A revolving door life, from the streets to Riker's Island to Bellevue to Central Islip Hospital to the Tombs.

But to her admirers Marsha represents more than streetwise survival. She can turn conventional values on their head, publicly affirming her differentness, making beauty from the most unlikely materials. Marsha's camp-garbage aesthetic is shared by many street transvestites — affordable, democratic taste — but Marsha is an acknowledged leader. "Marsha caught on like wildfire," Bob (formerly Flash) Storm remembers, "and set all these new trends in dressing. She was the abundance and beauty of the street trash. And flowers, always flowers. Going after this sky-high energy with extreme makeup and colored wigs and pins and jewelry. She looked like an ornament when she was done." Marsha's transformation defies masculinity, but she is still a far cry from feminine — her out-sized features protruding beneath the makeup, flamboyant clothes set on a six-foot body, muscled arms and legs.

Her plumed saintliness is volatile, however; two weeks after her night as a nun, Marsha was in Riker's Island again after striking a Ty's bartender who had refused his patronage. It was not an isolated incident. One Christopher Street shop manager called Marsha a "bully underneath that soft sweet manner." Others have cited Marsha's toughness, and Sylvia Rivera recalls she first met Marsha in a drag-out fight with a street queen who had pulled Marsha's Halloween wig from her head. Aggression has been a necessary part of Marsha's life. She doesn't make friends on Christopher Street.

Those who knew her, especially Sylvia Rivera, adamantly contested this, urging an investigation, especially after news surfaced that Marsha had been seen being harassed on the pier where her body was later found and that there was a massive wound to the back of her head.

An investigation was not conducted until activist Mariah Lopez succeeded in mounting enough pressure for the NYPD to reopen the case in 2012.

So far there have been no new leads and no convictions.

Marsha P Johnson was not part of the white club.

She was about as far from the acceptable class of queer as one could be.

She was a loud, black, mentally ill, homeless drag queen who refused to stay silent or to smother herself into "respectability".

Although she struggled with mental health issues, homelessness, and poverty throughout her life, she became known as "Saint Martha," the patron saint of young homeless queer people.

Reportedly she would give up anything and everything to help anyone who needed it.

She did not receive the same kindness; she remained destitute even as she was world-renowned. In 1992, Marsha told the world that she had been HIV+ since 1990.

On July 6th, 1992, at 46 years old, Marsha P Johnson's body was found in the Hudson River in New York City.

Without an investigation, police ruled her death a suicide.

"This last breakdown, I was fighting with everyone. I don't like getting in those fights, but when they say you can't stay and you don't know why… When I'm having a breakdown it seems like I meet all these weird people, all these strangers who don't understand gay people coming around. I know something is coming on and I light my candles and incense and pray to my saints. Sometimes I have visions. In one of them, there were 10 suns shining in the sky, gorgeous and freaked out, like the end of the world. I love my saints, darling, but sometimes the visions can be scary."

Marsha wasn't always a mythic figure, of course. She was once *redacted*, a church boy from Elizabeth, New Jersey. "I went every Sunday, honey, because I wanted to learn about Jesus. I always thought gayness was some sort of dream, something people talked about but never did. So I remained asexual for 17 years, until I left New Jersey and came to New York. It didn't look too gay, until I saw all these nellie things hustling near the Howard Johnson's at 6th Avenue and 8th Street." *redacted* soon put on a blond wig and became Marsha P. (for "Pay it no mind") Johnson.

"For the last 17 years," Marsha said, "my life has been built around sex and gay liberation, being a drag queen and dating all the time. It can get very boring you know, darling, all these men. Sometimes they hassle me if they thought I was a woman when they picked me up. I just say: 'Honey, this is like Macy's Department Store. If you like the merchandise, you take it. If you don't, I got to go.' I'd like to stop hustling and have a regular husband. It's easy to get a husband, but it's not easy to get them to, support me, or pay the bills, or give up sex. Because, honey, gay men don't give up sex for anything. My best husband — I met him dating — was a junkie and he got shot in a robbery. He wasn't a very good man, but he used to give me everything. I've had eight husbands and eight separations and none of them have given me a white house and picket fence."

Marsha's residence is spread out. "I've been 86ed from a lot of places — Ty's, Boots and Saddles, the Ramrod, the Silver Dollar, G.G. Knickerbockers, Keller's, the Limelight — so I spend most of my time on Christopher Street or under the West Side Highway." Marsha sleeps at the Beacon Baths ($7 a night), keeps her wardrobe in a Port Authority locker, makes up at department store sample counters (this morning it was Lord and Taylor, but the regular rotation includes Bloomingdale's, Macy's, Saks Fifth Avenue, B. Altman).

"I was in lots of raids before. All the street queens were. The paddy wagon was a regular routine. We used to sit in our little 42nd Street hotel rooms — 'hot spring hotels,' they used to call them — and party and get high and think about walking down the street somedays and not worry about getting busted by the police. That was a dream we all had, sitting in those hotel rooms or in the queens' tanks of the jails. So, honey, when it came that night, I was ready to tip a few cars for a dream. It was that year — 1969 — when I finally went out in the street in drag full-time. I just said, 'I don't give a shit,' and I've been in drag most of the time since."

As gay liberation changed from a resistance against police raids into a full-fledged movement, Marsha and fellow street transvestite Sylvia Rivera organized their people. Sylvia and Marsha knew each other from days of waiting tables at Child's Restaurant. They were a tough duo. The street transvestites became the vanguard of the movement: S.T.A.R. (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries). By 1971, they had their own communal house on 15th Street. It had only four rooms, and the landlord had turned the electricity off, but it became a home for a floating population of 20 street queens, living by candlelight, sleeping everywhere, including the bathtub. Marsha became the mother of the S.T.A.R. house, and for a year and a half those four rooms were a warm respite from the streets.

It didn't last long. Nothing could stave off the problem of rent. By July 1971, the house had closed and the street transvestites lost favor in gay liberation. S.T.A.R. dispersed. Some overdosed, some were stabbed by johns. Sylvia Rivera retired to a domestic life upstate as a food preparer. Looking back, Marsha merely says, "You know how people are. They're very close at one time and after a while they just go away." Marsha is one the few who remained — a walking relic of a half-dead movement.

Marsha's position on Christopher Street is double-edged. A martyr of gay liberation, she is denied entrance to many bars. Andy Warhol silkscreens of Marsha sell for $1400 in a Christopher Street gallery while Marsha walks the sidewalk outside, broke.

Marsha "Pay It No Mind" Johnson struggled for most of her life with mental illness; being hospitalized multiple times. She struggled with violent outbursts, despite her overall personality being incredibly kind, generous and patient.

Her activism was vilified, often from within the queer community itself, for its revolutionary inclusion. She advocated for sex workers, prisoners, drug users, the homeless, the mentally ill, transgender people, and those living with HIV and AIDS.
She was vocally in favor of mutual aid, vocally anti-police, and revolutionarily honest about her chronic mental illness, homelessness, drug use, and sex work.

She, both in being and in speaking, utterly rejected the idea that the queer community ought to become more palatable, and that individuals seek to make themselves more digestible to society at large in order to deserve respect.

So now we sit, in 2021, and attempt to weigh the life and legacy of a beautiful, vulnerable, complex and flawed person. When seeing all the tributes, all the murals, the statues planned in NYC and Marsha's hometown, I am so struck with one overwhelming thought.

Where was all this money, this love, when she was here? The answer is devastating in its simplicity; it's not.

"Marsha's position on Christopher Street is double-edged. A martyr of gay liberation, she is denied entrance to many bars. Andy Warhol silkscreens of Marsha sell for $1400 while Marsha walks the sidewalk outside, broke."

Steve Watson
June 15, 1979
The Village Voice

"Gay people aren't fighting anymore," drawled Marsha P. Johnson, 34. "They don't care as long as they have a bar to go to. You know that, darling. But when I came down here 10 years ago, I caught the drift the minute I walked into Sheridan Square. I said, 'It's about time, honey.' "

We were sitting in the Bagel And, originally the Stonewall bar, where resistance to police raids started gay liberation 10 years ago. This evening the space around us aspired to sleek wholesomeness instead of the warm sleaze of an unmarked, underlit gay bar — hanging plants instead of go-go boys. But despite the changes over 10 years, Marsha looks the same, still in her drag that is vibrantly out of tune with the times. When Marsha saunters up Christopher Street, a younger generation of ersatz cowboys and truckers looks at her as a plumed curiosity: why would anyone want to do that?

Marsha's drag the night we talked was merely a "'functional layering of coat over sweatsuit over a florid blouse; it had been a rainy day on the streets. But no weather could keep costume-jewelry earrings from Marsha's hair, nor the red plastic high heels from coming out of her bag once we were away from the puddles. Marsha patted a dab of rouge on her brown cheeks, added a scent of faded cologne, focused on me, on the potato salad, on the air, and continued on in her lazily singsong voice.

The love and the money go towards a caricature of the person Marsha P. Johnson was. We made her digestible. We made her simple. We, as a community, let her wallow in poverty, let her be murdered, and now let her memory be sanitized and scrubbed clean of its significance or authenticity.

We have failed her, and we continue to fail her.

She may be gone, but so many others are here. Do you look away when you see them? Are you too afraid to include them in your activism for fear that they will make your cause harder to swallow? Do you turn them away because they aren't "respectable enough" for your movement?

This article features almost as many photos of her as I could find. That's for good reason. I want people to look her in the eyes, and recognize her whole humanity, and grapple with what we've done to her, collectively, through our negligence.

The part that absolutely breaks me, every single time, is that in almost every picture taken of her, Marsha P. Johnson is smiling.

Before anyone dares say it; she was not martyred.

She was murdered.

She didn't want to die. She had a full life that she was living, and it was ripped away. There's no justice, no glory, and no goodness to come of that.

How can I tell you.

How can I convince you, brother; sister that your life is in danger.

That everyday you wake up alive, relatively happy, and a functioning human being, you are committing a rebellious act.

You as an alive and functioning queer are a revolutionary.

There is nothing on this planet that validates, protects or encourages your existence. It is a miracle you are standing here reading these words.

You should by all rights be dead.

Text of a manifesto originally passed out by people marching with the ACT UP contingent in the New York Gay Pride Day parade, 1990

THE QUEER NATION MANIFESTO

But of course that would mean listening to our anger, which they almost never do. They deflect it, by saying "I'm not like that" or "now look who's generalizing" or "You'll catch more flies with honey ... " or "If you focus on the negative you just give out more power" or "you're not the only one in the world who's suffering." They say "Don't yell at me, I'm on your side" or "I think you're overreacting" or "Boy, you're bitter."

Let Yourself Be Angry

They've taught us that good queers don't get mad.

They've taught us so well that we not only hide our anger from them, we hide it from each other. We even hide it from ourselves. We hide it with substance abuse and suicide and overachieving in the hope of proving our worth.

They bash us and stab us and shoot us and bomb us in ever increasing numbers and still we freak out when angry queers carry banners or signs that say Bash Back.

The current discourse about cops wanting to feel “included” in Pride is so beyond disrespectful to her and uncounted others who were literally abused, murdered and their legacies systematically destroyed by these same officers. Pride, as an event, only exists because of their resistance and struggle. Blood was shed. Lives were lost.

And those whose systemic abuses led to this event, this celebration of resistance and solidarity and vigil for the unknown masses of our ancestors whose stories we may never know, now dare to complain that they are not invited?

If we are to honor Marsha P Johnson and her legacy, in any way that matters, we will do it through radical honesty and revolutionary kindness. We will do it by protecting the most vulnerable of our community, and rejecting the myths of respectability politics. We will do it by being radically authentic and kind to the abused, not their abusers.

If you found this article helpful or informative, please consider donating to the Marsha P Johnson Institute, a charity that promotes the safety and wellbeing of black transgender people, especially those facing homelessness.

https://marshap.org/donate/

As Elle Hearns, the founder of the Marsha P Johnson Institute has said, *“I don’t think Marsha has left anything behind besides the permission of us all to be free.”*

For the last decade they let us die in droves and still we thank President Bush for planting a fucking tree, applaud him for likening PWAs to car accident victims who refuse to wear seatbelts.

Let yourself be angry.

Let yourself be angry that the price for visibility is the constant threat of violence, anti-queer violence to which practically every segment of this society contributes.

Let yourself feel angry that there is no place in this country where we are safe, no place where we are not targeted for hatred and attack, the self-hatred, the suicide - of the closet.

The next time some straight person comes down on you for being angry, tell them that until things change, you don't need any more evidence that the world turns at your expense.

You don't need to see only hetero couple grocery shopping on your TV ...

You don't want any more baby pictures shoved in your face until you can have or keep your own.

No more weddings, showers, anniversaries, please, unless they are our own brothers and sisters celebrating.

And tell them not to dismiss you by saying "You have rights," "You have privileges," "You are overreacting," or "You have a victim's mentality."

Tell them "Go away from me, until you change."

Go away and try on a world without the brave, strong queers that are its backbone, that are its guts and brains and souls.

Go tell them go away until they have spent a month walking hand in hand in public with someone of the same sex.

After they survive that, then you'll hear what they have to say about queer anger. Otherwise, tell them to shut up and listen.

Don't be fooled, straight people own the world and the only reason you have been spared is you're smart, lucky, or a fighter.

Straight people have a privilege that allows them to do whatever they please and fuck without fear. But not only do they live a life free of fears; they flaunt their freedom in my face. Their images are on my TV, in the magazine I bought, in the restaurant I want to eat in, and on the street where I live.

I want there to be a moratorium on straight marriage, on babies, on public displays of affection among the opposite sex and media images that promote heterosexuality. Until I can enjoy the same freedom of movement and sexuality, as straights, their privilege must stop and it must be given over to me and my queer sisters and brothers.

Straight people will not do this voluntarily and so they must be forced into it. Straights must be frightened into it. Terrorized into it. Fear is the most powerful motivator. No one will give us what we deserve. Rights are not given they are taken, by force if necessary.

It is easier to fight when you know who your enemy is. Straight people are you enemy. They are your enemy when they don't acknowledge your invisibility and continue to live in and contribute to a culture that kills you.

Every day one of us is taken by the enemy. Whether it is an AIDS death due to homophobic government inaction or a lesbian bashing in an all-night diner (in a supposedly lesbian neighborhood), we are being systematically picked off and we will continue to be wiped out unless we realize that if they take one of us they must take all of us.

I Hate Straights

I have friends. Some of them are straight.

Year after year, I see my straight friends. I want to see them, to see how they are doing, to add newness to our long and complicated histories, to experience some continuity.

Year after year I continue to realize that the facts of my life are irrelevant to them and that I am only half listened to, that I am an appendage to the doings of a greater world, a world of power and privilege, of the laws of installation, a world of exclusion.

"That's not true," argue my straight friends. There is the one certainty in the politics of power: those left out of it beg for inclusion, while the insiders claim that they already are. Men do it to women, whites do it to blacks, and everyone does it to queers.

The main dividing line, both conscious and unconscious, is procreation . .. and that magic word - Family. Frequently, the ones we are born into disown us when they find out who we really are, and to make matters worse, we are prevented from having our own.
We are punished, insulted, cut off, and treated like seditionaries in terms of child rearing, both damned if we try and damned if we abstain. It's as if the propagation of the species is such a fragile directive that without enforcing it as if it were an agenda, humankind would melt back into the primeval ooze.

I hate having to convince straight people that lesbians and gays live in a war zone, that we're surrounded by bomb blasts only we seem to hear, that our bodies and souls are heaped high, dead from fright or bashed or raped, dying of grief or disease, stripped of our personhood.

I hate straight people who can't listen to queer anger without saying "hey, all straight people aren't like that. I'm straight too, you know," as if their egos don't get enough stroking or protection in this arrogant, heterosexist world. Why must we take care of them, in the midst of our just anger brought on by their fucked up society?! Why add the reassurance of "Of course, I don't mean you. You don't act that way." Let them figure out for themselves whether they deserve to be included in our anger.

No Sex Police

For anyone to say that coming out is not part of the revolution is missing the point. Positive sexual images and what they manifest saves lives because they affirm those lives and make it possible for people to attempt to live as self-loving instead of self-loathing.

As the famous "Black is beautiful" changed many lives so does "Read my lips" affirm queerness in the face of hatred and invisibility as displayed in a recent governmental study of suicides that states at least 1/3 of all teen suicides are Queer kids. This is further exemplified by the rise in HIV transmission among those under 21.

We are most hated as queers for our sexualness, that is, our physical contact with the same sex. Our sexuality and sexual expression are what makes us most susceptible to physical violence.

Our difference, our otherness, our uniqueness can either paralyze us or politicize us.

Hopefully, the majority of us will not let it kill us.

untitled

Why in the world do we let heteros into queer clubs? Who gives a fuck if they like us because we "really know how to party?" We have to in order to blow off the steam they make us feel all the time! They make out wherever they please, and take up too much room on the dance floor doing ostentatious couples dances. They wear their heterosexuality like a "Keep Out" sign, or like a deed of ownership.

Why the fuck do we tolerate them when they invade our space like it's their right? Why do we let them shove heterosexuality - a weapon their world wields against us - right in our faces in the few public spots where we can be sexy with each other and not fear attack?

It's time to stop letting the straight people make all the rules. Let's start by posting this sign outside every queer club and bar:

My feet pound the streets and Peter's hands are chained to a pharmaceutical company's reception desk while the receptionist looks on in horror and Eric's body lies rotting in a Brooklyn cemetery and I'll never hear his flute resounding off the walls of the meeting house again.

And I see the old people in Tompkins Square Park huddled in their long wool coats in June to keep out the cold they perceive is there and to cling to whatever little life has left to offer them, and I think, ah, they understand.

And I'm reminded of the people who strip and stand before a mirror each night before they go to bed and search their bodies for any mark that might not have been there yesterday. A mark that this scourge has visited them. And I'm angry when the newspapers call us "victims" and sound alarms that "it" might soon spread to the "general population."

And I want to scream "Who the fuck am I?" And I want to scream at New York Hospital with its yellow plastic bags marked "isolation linen," "ropa infecciosa" and its orderlies in latex gloves and surgical masks skirt the bed as if its occupant will suddenly leap out and douse them with blood and semen giving them too the plague.

And I'm angry at straight people who sit smugly wrapped in their self-protective coat of monogamy and heterosexuality confident that this disease has nothing to do with them because it only happens to "them."

And the teenage boys who upon spotting my "Silence = Death" button begin chanting "Faggots gonna die" and I wonder, who taught them this? Enveloped in fury and fear, I remain silent while my button mocks me every step of the way.

And the anger I feel when a television program on the quilt gives profiles of the dead and the list begins with a baby, a teenage girl who got a blood transfusion, an elderly Baptist minister and his wife and when they finally show a gay man, he's described as someone who knowingly infected teenage male prostitutes with the virus.

What else can you expect from a faggot? I'm angry.

An Army of Lovers Cannot Lose

Being queer is not about a right to privacy; it is about the freedom to be public, to just be who we are. It means everyday fighting oppression; homophobia, racism, misogyny, the bigotry of religious hypocrites and our own self-hatred. (We have been carefully taught to hate ourselves.) And now of course it means fighting a virus as well, and all those homo-haters who are using AIDS to wipe us off the face of the earth.

Being queer means leading a different sort of life. It's not about the mainstream, profit-margins, patriotism, patriarchy or being assimilated. It's not about executive directors, privilege and elitism. It's about being on the margins, defining ourselves; it's about gender-fuck and secrets, what's beneath the belt and deep inside the heart; it's about the night. Being queer is "grass roots" because we know that everyone of us, every body, every cunt, every heart and ass and dick is a world of pleasure waiting to be explored. Everyone of us is a world of infinite possibility.

We are an army because we have to be. We are an army because we are so powerful. (We have so much to fight for; we are the most precious of endangered species.) And we are an army of lovers because it is we who know what love is. Desire and lust, too. We invented them. We come out of the closet, face the rejection of society, face firing squads, just to love each other! Every time we fuck, we win.

We must fight for ourselves (no else is going to do it) and if in that process we bring greater freedom to the world at large then great. (We've given so much to that world: democracy, all the arts, the concepts of love, philosophy and the soul, to name just a few of the gifts from our ancient Greek Dykes, Fags.)

Let's make every space a Lesbian and Gay space. Every street a part of our sexual geography. A city of yearning and then total satisfaction. A city and a country where we can be safe and free and more. We must look at our lives and see what's best in them, see what is queer and what is straight and let that straight chaff fall away!

Remember there is so, so little time. And I want to be a lover of each and every one of you.

Next year, we march naked.

I'm Angry

The strong sisters told the brothers that there were two important things to remember about the coming revolutions. The first is that we will get our asses kicked. The second is that we will win.

I'm angry.

I'm angry for being condemned to death by strangers saying, "You deserve to die" and "AIDS is the cure."

Fury erupts when a Republican woman wearing thousands of dollars of garments and jewelry minces by the police lines shaking her head, chuckling and wagging her finger at us like we are recalcitrant children making absurd demands and throwing a temper tantrum when they aren't met.

Angry while Joseph agonizes over $8,000 a year for AZT which might keep him alive a little longer and which does make him sicker than the disease he is diagnosed with.

Angry as I listen to a man tell me that after changing his will five times he's running out of people to leave things to. All of his best friends are dead.

Angry when I stand in a sea of quilt panels, or go to a candlelight march or attend yet another memorial service. I will not march silently with a fucking candle and I want to take that goddamned quilt and wrap myself in it and furiously rent it and my hair and curse every god religion ever created.

I refuse to accept a creation that cuts people down in the third decade of their life. It is cruel and vile and meaningless and everything I have in me rails against the absurdity and I raise my face to the clouds and a ragged laugh that sounds more demonic than joyous erupts from my throat and tears stream down my face and if this disease doesn't kill me, I may just die of frustration.

Rules of Conduct for Straight People:

1. Keep your displays of affection (kissing, handholding, embracing) to a minimum. Your sexuality is unwanted and offensive to many here.

2. If you must slow dance, be an inconspicuous as possible.

3. Do not gawk or stare at lesbians or gay men, especially bull dykes or drag queens. We are not your entertainment.

4. If you cannot comfortably deal with someone of the same sex making a pass at you, get out.

5. Do not flaunt your heterosexuality. Be discreet. Risk being mistaken for a lezzie or a homo.

6. If you feel these rules are unfair, go fight homophobia in straight clubs, or

7. Go fuck Yourself.

untitled

Since time began, the world has been inspired by the work of queer artists. In exchange, there has been suffering, there has been pain, there has been violence.

Throughout history, society has struck a bargain with its queer citizens: they must pursue creative careers, if they do so discreetly.

Through the arts queers are productive, lucrative, entertaining and even uplifting. These are the clear-cut and useful by-products of what is otherwise considered anti-social behavior. In cultured circles, queers may quietly coexist with an otherwise disapproving power elite.

At the forefront of the most recent campaign to bash queer artists is Jesse Helms, arbiter of all that is decent, moral, christian and amerikan. For Helms, queer art is quite simply a threat to the world.

In his imaginings, heterosexual culture is too fragile to bear up to the admission of human or sexual diversity. Quite simply, the structure of power in the Judeo-Christian world has made procreation its cornerstone.

Families having children assures consumers for the nation's products and a work force to produce them, as well as a built-in family system to care for its ill, reducing the expense of public healthcare systems.

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Families having children assures consumers for the nation's products and a work force to produce them, as well as a built-in family system to care for its ill, reducing the expense of public healthcare systems.

All non-procreative behavior is considered a threat, from homosexuality to birth control to abortion as an option.

Why Queer?

Queer!

Ah, do we really have to use that word? It's trouble. Every gay person has his or her own take on it. For some it means strange and eccentric and kind of mysterious. That's okay; we like that. But some gay girls and boys don't. They think they're more normal than strange.

And for others "queer" conjures up those awful memories of adolescent suffering. Queer. It's forcibly bittersweet and quaint at best - weakening and painful at worst. Couldn't we just use "gay" instead? It's a much brighter word. And isn't it synonymous with "happy"? When will you militants grow up and get over the novelty of being different?

Why Queer ...

Well, yes, "gay" is great. It has its place. But when a lot of lesbians and gay men wake up in the morning we feel angry and disgusted, not gay. So we've chosen to call ourselves queer.

Using "queer" is a way of reminding us how we are perceived by the rest of the world. It's a way of telling ourselves we don't have to be witty and charming people who keep our lives discreet and marginalized in the straight world. We use queer as gay men loving lesbians and lesbians loving being queer. Queer, unlike gay, doesn't mean male.

And when spoken to other gays and lesbians it's a way of suggesting we close ranks, and forget (temporarily) our individual differences because we face a more insidious common enemy. Yeah, queer can be a rough word but it is also a sly and ironic weapon we can steal from the homophobe's hands and use against him.

Get Up, Wake Up Sisters!!

Your life is in your hands.

When I risk it all to be out, I risk it for both of us. When I risk it all and it works (which it often does if you would try), I benefit and so do you. When it doesn't work, I suffer and you do not.

But girl you can't wait for other dykes to make the world safe for you. **stop** waiting for a better more lesbian future! The revolution could be here if we started it.

Where are you sisters? I'm trying to find you, I'm trying to find you.

How come I only see you on Gay Pride Day?

We're out. Where the fuck are you?

untitled

I hate Jesse Helms. I hate Jesse Helms so much I'd rejoice if he dropped down dead. If someone killed him I'd consider it his own fault.

I hate Ronald Reagan, too, because he mass-murdered my people for eight years. But to be honest, I hate him even more for eulogizing Ryan White without first admitting his guilt, without begging forgiveness for Ryan's death and for the deaths of tens of thousands of other PWA's - most of them queer. I hate him for making a mockery of our grief.

I hate the fucking Pope, and I hate John fucking Cardinal O'Connor, and I hate the whole fucking Catholic Church. The same goes for the Military, and especially for Amerika's Law Enforcement Officials - the cops - state sanctioned sadists who brutalize street transvestites, prostitutes and queer prisoners.

I also hate the medical and mental health establishments, particularly the psychiatrist who convinced me not to have sex with men for three years until we (meaning he) could make me bisexual rather than queer. I also hate the education profession, for its share in driving thousands of queer teens to suicide every year.

I hate the "respectable" art world; and the entertainment industry, and the mainstream media, especially The New York Times. In fact, I hate every sector of the straight establishment in this country - the worst of whom actively want all queers dead, the best of whom never stick their necks out to keep us alive.

I hate straight people who think they have anything intelligent to say about "outing." I hate straight people who think stories about themselves are "universal" but stories about us are only about homosexuality.

I hate straight recording artists who make their careers off of queer people, then attack us, then act hurt when we get angry and then deny having wronged us rather than apologize for it. I hate straight people who say, "I don't see why you feel the need to wear those buttons and t-shirts. I don't go around tell the whole world I'm straight."

I hate that in twelve years of public education I was never taught about queer people. I hate that I grew up thinking I was the only queer in the world, and I hate even more that most queer kids still grow up the same way. I hate that I was tormented by other kids for being a faggot, but more that I was taught to feel ashamed for being the object of their

It is not enough, according to the religious right, to consistently advertise procreation and heterosexuality ... it is also necessary to destroy any alternatives. It is not art Helms is after ... It is our lives!

Art is the last safe place for lesbians and gay men to thrive. Helms knows this, and has developed a program to purge queers from the one arena they have been permitted to contribute to our shared culture.

Helms is advocating a world free from diversity or dissent. It is easy to imagine why that might feel more comfortable to those in charge of such a world. It is also easy to envision an amerikan landscape flattened by such power.

Helms should just ask for what he is hinting at: State sponsored art, art of totalitarianism, art that speaks only in christian terms, art which supports the goals of those in power, art that matches the sofas in the Oval Office.

Ask for what you want, Jesse, so that men and women of conscience can mobilize against it, as we do against the human rights violations of other countries, and fight to free our own country's dissidents.

The more we allow homophobes to inflict violence, terror and fear on our lives, the more frequently and ferociously we will be the object of their hatred.

Your body cannot be an open target for violence. Your body is worth protecting. You have a right to defend it.

No matter what they tell you, your queerness must be defended and respected.

You'd better learn that your life is immeasurably valuable, because unless you start believing that, it can easily be taken from you.

If you know how to gently and efficiently immobilize your attacker, then by all means, do it. If you lack those skills, then think about gouging out his fucking eyes, slamming his nose back into his brain, slashing his throat with a broken bottle - do whatever you can, whatever you have to, to save your life!

If You're Queer, Shout It!

Queers are under siege.

Queers are being attacked on all fronts and I'm afraid it's ok with us. In 1969, Queers, were attacked. It wasn't ok. Queers fought back, took the streets.

Shouted

In 1990, there were 50 "Queer Bashings" in the month of May alone.

Violent attacks. 3,720 men, women and children died of AIDS in the same month, caused by a more violent attack - government inaction, rooted in society's growing homophobia.

This is institutionalized homophobia, perhaps more dangerous to the existence of queers because the attackers are faceless. We allow these attacks by our own continued lack of action against them.

AIDS has affected the straight world and now they're blaming us for AIDS and using it as a way to justify their violence against us. They don't want us anymore.

They will beat us, rape us and kill us before they will continue to live with us. What will it take for This not to be ok? Feel some rage. If rage doesn't empower you, try fear. If that doesn't work try panic.

Shout it!

Be proud. Do whatever you need to do to tear yourself away from your customary state of acceptance. Be free. Shout.

In 1969, Queers fought back. In 1990, Queers say ok.

Next year, will we be here?

untitled

When anyone assaults you for being queer, it is queer bashing. Right?

A crowd of 50 people exit a gay bar as it closes. Across the street, some straight boys are shouting "Faggots" and throwing beer bottles at the gathering, which outnumbers them by 10 to 1. Three queers make a move to respond, getting no support from the group. Why did a group this size allow themselves to be sitting ducks?

Tompkins Square Park, Labor Day. At an annual outdoor concert/drag show, a group of gay men were harassed by teens carrying sticks. In the midst of thousands of gay men and lesbians, these straight boys beat two gay men to the ground, then stood around triumphantly laughing amongst themselves. The emcee was alerted and warned the crowd from the stage, "You girls be careful. When you dress up it drives the boys crazy," as if it were a practical joke inspired by what the victims were wearing rather than a pointed attack on anyone and everyone at that event.

What would it have taken for that crowd to stand up to its attackers?

After James Zappalorti, an openly gay man, was murdered in cold blood on Staten Island this winter, a single demonstration was held in protest. Only one hundred people came. When Yusef Hawkins, a black youth, was shot to death for being on "White turf" in Bensonhurst, African Americans marched through that neighborhood in large numbers again and again.

A black person was killed because he was black, and people of color throughout the city recognized it and acted on it. The bullet that hit Hawkins was meant for a black man, any black man. Do most gays and lesbians think that the knife that punctured Zappalorti's heart was meant only for him?

The straight world has us so convinced that we are helpless and deserving victims of the violence against us, that queers are immobilized when faced with a threat. Be outraged! These attacks must not be tolerated. Do something. Recognize that any act of aggression against any member of our community is an attack on every member of the community.

Where Are You Sisters?

Invisibility is Our Responsibility

I wear my pink triangle everywhere. I do not lower my voice in public when talking about lesbian love or sex. I always tell people I'm a lesbian. I don't wait to be asked about my "boyfriend." I don't say it's "no one's business."

I don't do this for straight people. Most of them don't know what the pink triangle even means. Most of them couldn't care less that my girlfriend and I are totally in love or having a fight on the street. Most of them don't notice us no matter what we do. I do what I do to reach other lesbians.

I do what I do because I don't want lesbians to assume I'm a straight girl. I am out all the time, everywhere, because I want to reach you. Maybe you'll notice me, maybe start talking, maybe we'll become friends. Maybe we won't say a word but our eyes will meet and I will imagine you naked, sweating, openmouthed, your back arched as I am fucking you. And we'll be happy to know we aren't the only ones in the world. We'll be happy because we found each other, without saying a word, maybe just for a moment.

But no.

You won't wear a pink triangle on that linen lapel. You won't meet my eyes if I flirt with you on the street. You avoid me on the job because I'm "too" out. You chastise me in bars because I'm "too political." You ignore me in public because I bring "too much" attention to "my" lesbianism. But then you want me to be your lover, you want me to be your friend, you want me to love you, support you, fight for "our" right to exist.

Where Are You?

You talk, talk, talk about invisibility and then retreat to your homes to nest with your lovers or carouse in a bar with pals and stumble home in a cab or sit silently and politely by while your family, your boss, your neighbors, your public servants distort and disfigure us, deride us and punish us. Then home again and you feel like screaming. Then you pad your anger with a relationship or a career or a party with other dykes like you and still you wonder why we can't find each other, why you feel lonely, angry, alienated.